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CHARLES · FRANCIS · ADAMS

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By Charles Francis Adams

THE MONROE DOCTRINE AND MOMMSEN'S LAW.

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CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

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THE MONROE DOCTRINE AND MOMMSEN'S LAW

SIXTY-EIGHT years ago the 6th of December last, J. Q. Adams, at the time serving in Congress, had occasion to meet George Bancroft, the historian, then Secretary of the Navy in the Cabinet of James K. Polk. Of what passed, Mr. Adams, after his wont, next day made a detailed diary record. In so doing he incidentally observed that the manner of the Secretary was conciliatory and apparently cordial; and then added, Mr. Bancroft "seemed anxious to know my

opinion" on the parts of the annual message of Mr. Polk, transmitted to Congress a few days previous, relating to the controversy with Great Britain over the Oregon boundary,— that known in history as the "Fifty-four Forty or Fight" message. Mr. Adams then went on as follows: —

"I said that I approved entirely of Mr. Polk's repeated assertion of the principle first announced by President James Monroe in a message to Congress, that the continents of North and South America were no longer to be considered as scenes for their future European colonization. [Mr. Bancroft] said he had heard that this

part of the message of Mr. Monroe had been inserted by him at my suggestion. I told [Mr. Bancroft] that was true; that I had been authorized by [Mr. Monroe] to assert the principle in a letter of instruction to Mr. Rush, then Minister in England, and had written the paragraph in the very words inserted by Mr. Monroe in his message. It was Mr. Monroe's custom, and has been, I believe, that of all the Presidents of the United States, to prepare their annual messages, and to receive from each of the heads of Departments paragraphs ready written relating to their respective Departments, and adopt them as written, or

with such modifications as the writer of the message deemed advisable. That this principle thus inserted was disagreeable to all the principle European sovereigns I well knew."

The very memorable passage in Monroe's message here referred to is familiar. It reads as follows: —

"The American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by European powers. . . . We should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our

peace and safety. With the existing colonies or dependencies of any European power, we have not interfered and shall not interfere. But with the governments who have declared their independence, and maintained it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration, and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling, in any other manner, their destiny, by any European power, in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition towards the United States."

I am here this evening scheduled

to speak on the "Origin of the Monroe Doctrine," so called, and it is in that connection I quote the above passages from the "Memoirs" of J. Q. Adams, and from the 1823 message of President Monroe. Historically speaking, my understanding is that in his remarks to Secretary Bancroft, Mr. Adams only referred to the first of two distinct and widely separated passages in the message — that relating to colonization — as originating with him. The second passage bore on the aims at that time of those party to the Holy Alliance; and for this the paternity of George Canning is asserted; though, as it stands in the message, it

was presumably submitted, "ready written," to the President by the Secretary of State. A distinction between the two passages must, under existing conditions, be observed. As I shall presently have occasion to point out, the portion of the message of 1823 which related to colonization is now, under existing conditions, practically obsolete. It is, however, to a degree different as respects the portion relating to the independence of American nations in the sense of the popular phrase "America for the Americans." In this respect it may with a certain plausibility be claimed that the Monroe Doctrine is still alive, a sentiment

the strength and vitality of which the lapse of years has not impaired.

Disposing thus of the Monroe Doctrine in both its parts, I will proceed further to premise that, as we all realize, nothing, whether in philosophy, history or law, is ever definitely settled, and every conclusion supposed to be finally arrived at is sure soon or late to be challenged. Accordingly, I want it at the outset distinctly understood that I am not now claiming for an ancestor of mine the origin of the "Doctrine" referred to. It may, I admit, as has been contended, have been developed twenty years before; nor am I prepared either to advocate

or dispute either of two later contentions, — one that his Secretary of State imposed it on a timid President, the other that a Bismarckian chief dictated it to an amazed and pallid scribe. My sole present purpose is to call attention to the fact that, as it appears in the Message of 1823, the "Doctrine" assumed shape from the pen of Mr. J. Q. Adams, then Secretary of State. Such being the case, we have a basis on which to discuss not only its origin but also its significance and intent. Knowing when it was formulated and by whom, we have to consider the environment and experiences of him who held the pen, and

the objects he had in view under international conditions then prevailing.

The "Doctrine" was enunciated in the closing months of 1823. The Secretary of State, who put it in form, was then in his fifty-seventh year. Born in 1767, his earliest and strongest impressions related to personal experiences in the eventful period between 1774, when his memories began, and 1782, when, a youth, the companion of his father and the other commissioners representing the American Congress in Europe, he practically participated in the negotiation which transformed the United States

from the condition of British provinces to an independent nationality. Later, he had himself come into public life during the wars of Napoleon, representing his country at various European courts, — The Hague, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and London — and, from positions of close proximity, studied anxiously the European situation as it then existed, — always with a view to American interests.

Bearing these facts in mind, it is not difficult, perhaps, to understand what J. Q. Adams was driving at when he set forth the "Doctrine." His thought naturally reverted to the conditions existing in his own coun-

try prior to and during the Revolutionary War, — that is, the "Colonial Period" and the "Provincial Status," — his mind being influenced and his expression colored by what he presumably had observed and gone through during a long and intimate subsequent European diplomatic experience. He was one of the very few who at that juncture understood both American conditions and European modes of thought and procedure. Under these conditions, what must he have been aiming at when he drafted the passages submitted by him, and incorporated in President Monroe's Message of 1823? To reach a con-

clusion on that point, it is necessary in the first place to separate ourselves from the present and have a clear conception of conditions then existing. It is to be remembered that in 1823 the world, just emerged from the Napoleonic wars, was still, as compared with what it now is, largely mediæval.

Napoleon, "the armed soldier of Democracy," as he has been sometimes termed in that stilted phraseology in which men so delight, had been effectually suppressed. He was extinguished; and the turn of the despots had come. The "Holy Alliance," so called, signifying the absolute suppression of popular government, was

in full swing. The United States had emerged from the War of 1812 a recognized sea power; and the Spanish dependencies in America were carrying on their long struggle with the so-called "mother country." So Monroe's Secretary of State, recalling the experiences of his early youth and the lessons he had later learned in Europe, framed the "Doctrine" as a manifesto of somewhat defiant character. Issued in the face of Europe, it was aimed at further American colonization by European powers, combined with the proposed suppression by them of the struggling Latin-American nationalities. It was, so to

speak, a formal notification on the part of the American Republic, designed primarily to administer a check to any colonizing intentions on the part of European powers, as colonization was understood in the period preceding the "Sphere of Influence" dispensation. Colonization, meanwhile, was in 1823 an entirely different thing from what it is now. The colony was in the European conception what it had been in the days of Athens,—a dependency and adjunct of the mother state. Going further, the Holy Alliance, *quoad* America, was a reactionary movement looking to the perpetuation of that colonial status which

Mr. Adams so distinctly recalled among the memories of his childhood. Out of that status the United States had painfully struggled, and the idea of Mr. Adams was to encourage other American colonies to move along the same lines to a similar result. On the other hand, knowing little or nothing of the antecedents of those colonies and dependencies, he gravely misconceived the situation. He had his countrymen and the English-speaking communities always in mind.

Meanwhile, every single condition referred to has since ceased to exist. The character of the problem has

wholly changed. In the first place, both the American continents are now occupied, and occupied by responsible and independent powers — this with the exception of certain English-speaking dominions and dependencies, practically self-governing.

On the other hand, new industrial, financial, and racial movements have asserted themselves. In 1823 in this respect wholly undeveloped, the Americas, North and South, are now a favorite field for European investment. Their railroad lines, their banks, their improvements of every character, are largely held, and, in many cases, controlled and managed, in European fi-

nancial circles. A tide of emigration of the most pronounced character, composed of many different currents, has developed, from every country in Europe. This, as a voluntary migration and in its present form, dates from the Irish movement which set in a score of years after the Monroe Doctrine was promulgated. The more recent movements do not need to be referred to.

It is, however, a noticeable feature in our American development that so far from bringing with them their own government, laws, and political institutions, there is no portion of the American population which would regard

with so little favor the introduction of European methods or mother-country practices as emigrants to America taken as a whole. This is true of the English, the French, the German, the Italian and the Slav no less than of the Irish. One and all, they would object even more than the stock known as "native American" to that form of colonization at which the Monroe Doctrine was aimed. The "Doctrine" as enunciated, therefore, is now obsolete. It has no apparent application to existing conditions and theories.

Moreover, it is to be remembered that it is a "Doctrine," and in no respect a natural law; and if, I next

submit, there is one thing politically more dangerous than another, it is a "Doctrine," so called, misapplied, or one which, having lost its original significance, is now applied in an unintelligent way, or a "Jingo" spirit. Such a "Doctrine," degenerated into a cult or fetish, is apt to come in impact with some real underlying law of Nature and, when it does, the result is — the unexpected!

Numerous examples at once suggest themselves of these "Doctrines," hardened into accepted cults. Let one suffice. The "Balance of Power Doctrine," now a by-word, a century ago was a terrible reality. Of it John

Bright — always a name to conjure with in America — has said : —

"I think I am not much mistaken in pronouncing the theory of the balance of power to be pretty nearly dead and buried. You cannot comprehend at a thought what is meant by that balance of power. If the record could be brought before you — but it is not possible to the eye of humanity to scan the scroll upon which are recorded the sufferings which the theory of the balance of power has entailed upon this country. It rises up before me when I think of it as a ghastly phantom which during one hundred and seventy years, whilst it has been worshipped in this

country, has loaded the nation with debt and with taxes, has sacrificed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Englishmen, has desolated the homes of millions of families. . . . I am very glad to be able to say that we may rejoice that this foul idol — fouler than any heathen tribe ever worshipped — has at last been thrown down, and that there is one superstition less which has its hold upon the minds of English statesmen and of the English people."

Is it not barely possible that, as things are now tending, a century hence some future statesman or publicist may comment in not dissimilar terms on our Monroe Doctrine, the

scope and significance of which is to-day, I submit, as little understood as was the scope and significance of the "Balance of Power Doctrine" in Europe a century ago?

Returning, however, to my proper theme, the origin of the Monroe Doctrine, while to-day's existing conditions never in the remotest degree entered into the conception of the framer of that "Doctrine," and the conditions which then confronted him have since wholly disappeared — it is interesting to consider what results he contemplated as likely to ensue at a not remote day from the position assumed. Two of those results are, I

think, apparent and indisputable. I refer, of course, to results existing in his conception of the probable outcome of the future as forecast from the 1823 standpoint.

Of "Hegemony" we now hear much. As a political term it had in 1823 not come into existence. Greek in origin, even as late as 1860 it was explained in the London "Times" as "leadership among states," or, as that "land of professors" phrased it, "the hegemony of the Germanic Confederation." The origin of the term must, of course, be looked for in the history of ancient Greece, where it signified the leadership of Athens on the one

hand, and Sparta on the other. There can be no question that when enunciating the famous "Doctrine," Monroe's Secretary, a student of history as well as a scholarly man, had in mind a family of American States under the hegemony, or, as he would have expressed it, the leadership, of the United States; this country alone having then achieved a standing among nations, as well as independence. Using a familiar form of speech, the United States was, in Mr. Adams's mind, to be the "Big Brother" in that family circle. This fact is evidenced in the struggle over the Panama Congress, subsequently such a

distinctive feature in the J. Q. Adams Administration. The scheme, as we all know, proved abortive, and subsequent experience shows clearly that neither Mr. Adams nor Mr. Clay had any realizing sense of the limitations under which, humanly speaking, hegemony was practicable. Indeed, at that time those limitations had not forced themselves on the minds of public men. Napoleon, for instance, planned that Eastern Europe, wholly irrespective of racial considerations, was to constitute a family, or circle, of kingdoms under the hegemony of France. He had not the faintest conception of a limiting law. We, a cen-

tury later, after abundant lessons almost as severe as those incident to the "Balance of Power" dispensation, have had occasion to realize that hegemony, practically speaking, is only possible with communities of the same racial descent. A distinctly foreign element invariably asserts a disturbing presence. This, before his downfall, Napoleon had occasion to realize; and now the law may be studied in operation in the cases of Norway and Sweden, Holland and Belgium, Austria and Italy, Austro-Hungary, Great Britain and Ireland, and most recent of all, in that of the Balkans. It is a long record of unending discords.

Results in such cases are never satisfactory. For this reason, and under conditions now existing on the two American continents, the hegemonic application of the Monroe Doctrine is, I confidently submit, out of the question. Racial limitations bar the way. So much for hegemony, and the law of its limitation. I now pass to another law.

I will call it "Mommsen's Law," because nowhere else than in Mommsen's "History" have I seen it stated with such Germanic directness, bordering on brutality. This "Law" reads as follows: —

"By virtue of the law, that a people

which has grown into a state absorbs its neighbors who are in political nonage, and a civilized people absorbs its neighbors who are in intellectual nonage, — by virtue of this law, which is as universally valid and as much a law of nature as the law of gravity, — the Italian nation (the only one in antiquity which was able to combine a superior political development and a superior civilization, though it presented the latter only in an imperfect and external manner) was entitled to reduce to subjection the Greek states of the East which were ripe for destruction, and to dispossess the peoples of lower grades of culture in the

West — Libyans, Iberians, Celts, Germans — by means of its settlers; just as England with equal right has in Asia reduced to subjection a civilization of rival standing but politically impotent, and in America and Australia has marked and ennobled, and still continues to mark and ennoble, extensive barbarian countries with the impress of its nationality. . . . It is the imperishable glory of the Roman democracy or monarchy — for the two coincide — to have correctly apprehended and vigorously realized this its highest destination." [1]

Not until the framer of the Mon-

[1] *History of Rome*, book v, chap. viii.

roe Doctrine had been ten years in his grave did Mommsen lay the law down in these terms; yet Mr. Adams manifestly had its essence clearly in mind when he penned the "Doctrine" incorporated in the message of 1823. In Europe he had been a careful observer of the forcible goings-on of Napoleon — Napoleonic "Benevolent Assimilation"! He had represented this country in Russia for a number of years; and, as a reminiscence of that struggle for independence which had figured so largely in the memory of his childhood, he vividly recalled the partition of Poland. It is unnatural to assume that

these memories and lessons were not uppermost in his mind when he put the Monroe Doctrine in written shape. So far as Europe and Mommsen's Law were concerned, exemplified in the case of Poland and practiced by Napoleon, he wished to lay down for America a doctrine of "hands off." And this he did.

While both "Hegemony" and "Mommsen's Law" were thus distinctly present in the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine, the last entered into consideration only so far as Europe was concerned; and, from that point of view, the "Doctrine" served its purpose. Both Mommsen's

Law and the law of hegemonic limitation are, however, still operative; nor can they be left out of consideration in any discussion of the "Doctrine" in its present possible application and practical working. The question presents itself, — Has the United States, as the original "Big Brother," and now the dominant American world-power, taken in this matter the place of Europe? In other words, conceiving a family of American States, it is well to bear in mind that, while the Monroe Doctrine proper has become inoperative, the law of limitations in the case of "Hegemony" and "Mommsen's

Law" is, and will remain, in operation. This Mr. Adams had occasion to realize in the latter years of his life, though it is questionable whether he ever appreciated the operation of the law he had vetoed as respects Europe when working to the accretion of his own country. He certainly offered all the resistance in his power to it when it presented itself under the guise of a "Reannexation of Texas," and in the name of "Manifest Destiny." Natural laws in their operation have thus a way of assuming strange names; later we meet "Mommsen's Law," rechristened as the "Ostend Manifesto," and only recently it again masquer-

aded as "Benevolent Assimilation." All these, however, are merely aliases; "Sphere of Influence" is the very latest. Be not in this matter deceived by forms of speech. Keep in mind the French aphorism — *Cherchez la femme!*

I state these propositions in connection with my theme, the "Origin of the Monroe Doctrine." It is for others, during the discussions now begun, to refer, as Mr. Root has this evening done, to the "Doctrine" historically, to the glosses attempted on it, misconceptions which prevail concerning it, and the limitations which have developed in its operation. With these prop-

ositions I have no concern. I confine my contribution to the origin of the "Doctrine," the conditions which prevailed at the time it was enunciated, and the fact that another world has since come into existence. Furthermore, it is hardly necessary for me, addressing this particular audience, to say that I speak neither as an originator nor an advocate. I merely call attention to an alleged natural Law, propounded many years ago by an eminent publicist and historian. His statement of it may be correct, and it may be a law of universal application; possibly, on the other hand, it is a figment of Mommsen's imagination, or appli-

cable only locally. These aspects of the case are no affair of mine. I merely quote the law as enunciated, and call attention to its possible relations with the Monroe Doctrine. I draw no inferences, much less advocate or urge acceptance. I refer to this law exactly as I would refer to the law of gravity, were I here discoursing on the development of aeronautics. None the less, when the Monroe Doctrine is considered in connection with the law of hegemonic limitation and "Mommsen's Law," the apparent logic of to-day's Mexican situation [1]

[1] This paper was read at the first session of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the American

accentuates itself. It was, I believe, Secretary Olney, who, some twenty years ago, laid down the principle that the United States is "practically sovereign on this continent, and that its fiat is law upon the subject to which it confines its interposition." In other words, the United States is as respects the field in question a law unto itself. It defines the limits and character of its suzerainty. Not unnat-

Society of International Law, at Washington, D.C., the evening of April 22, 1914; on the previous day (Tuesday, April 21) Vera Cruz had been occupied by the United States naval forces, acting under the order of President Wilson, issued in consequence of the Tampico incident and the consequent attitude of the Huerta Government.

urally the sensibilities of other members of the American family of nations were more or less disturbed by this utterance, indisputably Delphic while in no way called for by the necessities of the case in hand. However, not to be outdone, and with a view perhaps to clearing away any oracular obscurity in the previous utterance, President Roosevelt a few years later [1904] thus further expanded, while expounding, the "Doctrine": —

"It is not true that the United States feels any land hunger or entertains any projects as regards other nations of the Western Hemisphere save such as are for their welfare. All

that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves well can count upon our hearty friendship. If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States. Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may, in America as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation, and in the Western Hemi-

sphere, the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power."

Viewed in this way, and with the law of "Hegemonic Limitation" and "Mommsen's Law," "that two-handed engine at the door," is it not desirable that the still so-called "Monroe Doctrine" should at this juncture receive further and thoughtful consideration? An example of this we have had this evening in the address of Mr. Root. Freed from gloss and mis-

construction, the "Doctrine" has been brought back to a basis at least intelligible. Still, National Self-Complacency is a weakness from which even We are not altogether exempt; in certain of the Pan-American family circle "Benevolent Assimilation" may after all be looked upon as only a euphemistic form of "Nutritive Deglutition." The veil drawn aside, may not "Mommsen's Law," in all its nakedness, stand revealed? For now and here, as heretofore and elsewhere, —

"We are puppets, Man in his pride, and
Beauty fair in her flower;
Do we move ourselves, or are moved by
an unseen hand at a game

That pushes us off from the board, and
others ever succeed?

. . . . . .

"For the drift of the Maker is dark, an
Isis hid by the veil.
Who knows the ways of the world, how
God will bring them about?
Our planet is one, the suns are many,
the world is wide.
Shall I weep if a Poland fall? shall I
shriek if a Mexico fail?"

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